



# Ahimsā

Newsletter of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

June 2014 (2558)

## Buddhism — Still Relevant in Today's World

BY JASON WIDENER

In the 21st century, in the West particularly, many ask what possible relevance ancient, contemplative teachings have for modern society. Even though more than 2,600 years have passed since the man, who was called “the Buddha”, walked the earth, there are still — even in today’s world — universal and timeless truths that all human beings — from the richest to the poorest, from the most powerful to the most vulnerable — must come to grips with. Whether we live in the hot, dry plains of Africa, the chilly, northern climates of Europe, or the deep Southern states of the US, all human beings share a common fate. We are all born, we all get sick, we all grow old, and we must all, without exception, pass from this existence, giving up all we are and leaving behind all we know and love. This is the shared, constant, and unchanging truth that has applied to all living beings since the beginning of time.

Even though we all are aware of these facts, we live in a society and culture which allows us, at some level, to isolate ourselves from these hard facts. We’ve developed strategies that curb the harsh reality of existence and dull the sharp edges of suffering so that we can go about our daily lives in a sort of denial. We’ve developed chemicals for every type of mental anguish. We treat our depression, anxiety, boredom, even our lack of attention and hyperactivity. Yet chemicals are a fairly new salve in man’s long history in treating life’s painful afflictions. From birth, many of us are given a group identity, a religion that is passed down to us from our parents, based solely upon the region from which our forefathers happened to emerge. And despite the absolute, certain beliefs of all the conflicting faiths, the fact that we are

Christian, rather than Muslim, or Hindu rather than Jewish is no more complicated or profound than the group to which we are born. And all of these religions have a belief structure that provides reasons or explanations to us for why we suffer and usually promise some sort of reward for following the rules of our group and bearing all of life’s burdens until our end. Sickness, old age, and death are sanitized and kept out of view. The sick are isolated in back rooms, hospitals, and hospices. The mentally ill are hidden and locked away in jails and institutions. The old and decrepit are kept in nursing homes and the dead are processed with machines, chemicals, and makeup, all so that we’re not exposed to the harsh realities of life and the decay of death.

Yet with all of our means of isolating ourselves from the bitterest aspects of existence, sooner or later, these strategies fail. We notice that, even in the best of times, we struggle. Even when no one close to us has died, when there are no armies massing on the horizon, our pantries are stocked with food, we have a job that we like, and even the weather is warm and sunny — even when everything is going as well as things can go, we

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## Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

## Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- *Dhamma* study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

## Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original Teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the Teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the *Dhamma*, based primarily on Pāḷi sources.
2. To promote practice of the *Dhamma* in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the *Dhamma*, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pāḷi language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

## Dhamma Study Groups

The current Sunday morning meeting schedule is as follows:

- 9:00 AM: Basic/Introductory study group focusing on *The Noble Eightfold Path*.
- 10:00 AM: Meditation sitting.
- 11:00 AM: Intermediate study group focusing on *Just Seeing* by Cynthia Thatcher.

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notice that, at the level of our attention, moment to moment, we are constantly seeking happiness but only finding temporary relief from the specter of the constant suffering and dissatisfactions of life. We discover that no matter how long we yearn for something or how gratifying something is to obtain, the feeling we get, from even the most intense pleasures, the most profound joys, last for only a very short time. No lasting happiness can ever be obtained from the gratification of our wants and desires.

All of our pleasures, by their very nature, are fleeting. The best that we can do is merely reiterate and repeat them. Even when things are going as well as they possibly can, we continue our ongoing effort to keep boredom, dissatisfaction, and doubt at bay. At best, the most fortunate among us with the most ordered and gratifying lives are regularly interrupted by death and the loss of loved ones. And there are few of us who must not deal with far more intense suffering, on far too frequent a basis.

It is within this context that people wonder whether there is a different form of well-being. A form of well-being that does not merely depend on reiterating one's pleasures and avoiding one's pains. Is it possible to be happy before one's desires are gratified or even in the midst of one's suffering? Can we find satisfaction within the very depths of life's ups and downs, in the face of old age, sickness, and death without depending on those age-old strategies, such as religion, that themselves cause so much division and suffering in the world? These are the questions that are always just under the surface, at the very periphery of everyone's consciousness.

The search for the answer to these questions is the true definition of spirituality. A spirituality that lies not in a belief or an adherence to dogma that is handed-down to us from our parents or society. This spirituality does not have all the baggage that we normally associate with this word. This form of spirituality recognizes the innate and inborn numinous — the awe-inspiring in all of us. It is an active search. It is a way of life — a philosophy of living that is not based on faith but of exploration and experience.

This is exactly the search that the Buddha was

on. He searched for the answers to the virtually, constant disappointments of life. Not only relief from old age, suffering, and death, but also the pain of separation from those we love and the pain of having to be conjoined with those we dislike. It is the relief from this suffering (from the most intense pain to the most mundane and chronic dissatisfaction) that he sought. And it is exactly that which he found.

It's important to realize that what the Buddha discovered was not rooted in mysticism and the supernatural. His discovery was realistic, practical, and profound. It was (and still is) verifiable and repeatable. It was a new way of seeing things, not as they appear, but as they truly are. He penetrated a few simple but profound truths that opened for mankind a totally new outlook on existence, and best of all, he created a path to understand these truths — a process for examining and confirming, at the most visceral level, the correctness of these universal laws known as the Four Noble Truths:

1. **Life is full of suffering and dissatisfaction.**  
To live is to experience the inherent burdens of life. This is, of course, not to say that there is no happiness. Many, who do not bother to investigate the Buddha's teachings with more than a cursory effort, accuse Buddhism of being pessimistic, nihilistic, or depressing. This simply is not true. The Buddha's teachings recognize that we do experience moments of happiness in our lives but they are fleeting; they always, without exception, come to an end. We spend all of our time trying to reiterate or re-experience those moments of happiness. The Buddha recognized the vicissitudes, the ups and downs, of our lives as an illusion and discovered a different, more fulfilling way to live.
2. **Our suffering is caused and is driven by our need to satisfy our wants and desires,** which are rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of the universe and our place in it. We are always trying to reiterate and re-experience happiness. Our very lives are driven by it. It occupies all of our time and thought. All of our efforts are devoted to this goal that, at best, will bring only brief, momentary satisfaction. Think about how many times in your life

you've said to yourself, "if only I can accomplish this, then I'll be happy." Maybe your goal was to buy a new car, or get a particular job, or find someone to spend your life with. How long were you satisfied and content before seeking something new, something else that would satisfy your drive to find "happiness?"

3. **This suffering and dissatisfaction can be overcome**, and we can live in a state of perfection, supreme peace and transcendent love for all beings. The Buddha found a way to live a life of true happiness without the perpetual ups and downs of constantly seeking a happiness that will never be satisfied. He found this way of life for himself and provided a practical, systematic path for others to follow to achieve the same goal.
4. **The way, or path out of dissatisfaction, to accomplish this state of living**, is well defined, well mapped, and achievable through a series of eight steps (known as the Noble Eightfold Path), which are divided into three areas of training the mind: **wisdom, morality, and concentration**.

**Wisdom** is achieved through *Right Understanding* (that is, a true understanding of the Four Noble Truths) and *Right Thought* (or *Right Intention* — means practicing generosity and renouncing attachments and the constant craving to re-live, re-iterate, and re-experience the happiness of the past). It means to live with the intention to never cause harm to one's self or another and to dedicate one's life to the search of spiritual awakening.

**Morality** is achieved through *Right Speech*, *Right Action*, and *Right Livelihood*. But before we talk about the individual constituents of "Buddhist Morality" we must first make an important distinction between the Buddhist system of morality and other systems. All things being equal, intentionality is more important than outcome in the determination of morality. For example, if one were to unintentionally cause harm, that act would not necessarily be considered immoral even though it caused great suffering. In this sense, Buddhism is not utilitarian in nature.

The ends do not justify the means. This is very important in understanding the workings of Karma, but that is a much longer subject of discussion.

**Concentration** is achieved through *Right Effort*, *Right Mindfulness*, and *Right Concentration* of mind. These are the mental aspects of our training that will allow us to transform ourselves and stop the constant negative, and destructive thoughts, speech, and actions that are at the root of our suffering.

## Wisdom

**Right Understanding** is the understanding of the universal characteristics of existence, namely the reality of suffering, it's origins, it's cessation, and the path leading to it's cessation. This leads to a true understanding of the nature of all things and the moral/ethical laws that govern them.

**Right Thought** or **Right Intention** consists of renunciation, free from craving; of good will, free from aversion; and of compassion, free from cruelty. This leads to a pure and balanced state of mind that is free from greed, hatred, ill will, and cruelty.

## Morality or Ethics

**Right Speech** is more than just telling the truth, it's a commitment to never use speech as a means to harm others. That means refraining from malicious speech, harsh speech, and useless speech.

**Right Action** involves abstaining from intentionally killing or harming any living creature, abstaining from taking anything that is not freely given, and abstaining from sexual misconduct, that is, to never rape, commit adultery, or use deception and trickery to obtain sex. It's important to note that this does not condemn homosexuality, prostitution, pre-marital sex, or any sexual activity that is entered into freely and causes no physical, mental, or emotional harm.

**Right Livelihood** is to earn one's livelihood through a means that does not bring harm and suffering to any living beings, that is, to avoid trickery, usury, and trading in weapons, poisons, living beings, intoxicants, etc.



## Concentration

**Right Effort** means the effort that we make to improve ourselves both mentally and spiritually. This means to avoid and overcome bad actions in body, mind and speech; to develop and foster good actions that lead to inner-peace and wisdom. This effort is divided into four mental strategies:

- to prevent unarisen, unwholesome mental states from arising;
- to let go of unwholesome states that have already arisen;
- to develop and foster wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen;
- to maintain and perfect wholesome mental states that have already arisen.

**Right Mindfulness**, or mental alertness, consists of abiding self-possessed and attentive, contemplating according to reality: the body, sensations, the state of the mind, and the contents of the mind. This means to maintain mental clarity no matter what we are doing, thinking, or saying and keeping in mind the reality of existence; that is the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of life.

**Right Concentration** of mind consists of gaining one-pointed attention. This kind of mental concentration is directed towards a morally wholesome object and is bound-up with **Right Thought**, **Right Effort**, and **Right Mindfulness**.

All of these eight qualities of right mental and bodily thoughts, speech, and actions are achieved through constant vigilance, effort, and practice. In reality, these are all means of training the mind, because everything that we think, do, and say originates in the mind. It is our minds that drive us in every sense.

To achieve these goals, it takes a commitment and a realization that we cannot continue thinking, speaking, and acting the same way we always have. We cannot continue being a slave to the same thoughts and emotions that drive us. It takes a transformation of our character — a transformation that can be achieved by realizing the power of training and directing our minds through the practice of meditation.

In my next article, I'll explore the perception process and why mediation is the most effective tool for transforming our minds and training ourselves to be the best human beings we can possibly be. ■

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## The True Purpose Of Meditation

BY JASON WIDENER

The practice of meditation has been around for thousands of years. Recently, through scientific studies, we've confirmed the extensive physical and mental benefits of meditation. It's been shown that meditation improves sleep, reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, and even lengthen one's lifespan. There is even evidence that regular meditation actually changes the physical structure of areas of the brain, resulting in increased feelings of well being and a reduction of depression.

Even though these are all very convincing reasons to practice mediation, it is not the reason that meditation is at the center of Buddhist spiritual practice. To understand meditation as a spiritual exercise and the role that it plays in transforming the human mind, we must first take a step back and look at the world and how the mind functions and perceives the things around us.

First we must understand that when we perceive the people and events around us, it is not witnessed directly and without augmentation. Seen through the filter of our mind, something is always added or changed. What is added or changed is determined by the experiences of our past. The perception of our own life is like a movie that we are producing in our minds, and we are the star of our own particular block-buster. So when we react to something going on around us, we are reacting to the story-line that is going on in our head and not to the actual events in the world around us.

Everyone does this. Everyone adds something to their experiences because of the very nature of our perceptions, our cognitive process. As ordinary unenlightened beings, the universe can never be experienced directly and without modification, because the only way we can experience anything

is through our senses (sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste), which is then processed by our mind. This processing by our mind is so important in the perception process that Buddhism considers the mind as one of the senses, resulting in a total of six senses — sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste, and mind.

Before we talk more about how the mind changes or adds to our experiences, first let's talk about just how limited our senses really are. Of course, we all know that animals such as a bird of prey has far more acute sight than a human being which enables them to see something the size of a dime from hundreds of feet above. Some breeds of our canine friends, the dog, can smell tens of thousands of times better than we can.

But even when we extend our senses with the most sophisticated technology and instruments available to us and point it out towards the rest of the universe, we learn that the universe is comprised of 68.3% dark energy, 26.8% dark matter, and only 4.9% regular matter (source: Planck's high-precision cosmic microwave background map: <http://sci.esa.int/planck/51557-planck-s-new-cosmic-recipe/>). This means that, at best, we are capable of perceiving only 4.9% of everything in existence. To say that our perceptions are limited is an understatement.

Now that we've established just how limited our perceptions are, let's move on to the second aspect of human perception that we need to talk about so that we'll better understand the real purpose of meditation. The perception process is, at its core, flawed, making impartial and objective perception truly an impossibility. The Buddha's teaching describes the perception or cognitive process in great detail. This process by which we experience everything in our universe is broken down into five stages. In Buddhist teaching these stages or levels of perception are known as the "Five Aggregates." These Five Aggregates occur in everyone, whenever we encounter anything in our environment. These aggregates always occur in the order in which they are listed here.

1. The first aggregate is: **Material Form**. This refers simply to the physical matter of which objects are made. It also refers to the physical components by which we sense the objects

around us; our eyes if through sight, our nose if through smell, etc.

2. The second aggregate is: **Sensation** (or **Feeling**). This refers to the response that is induced by the raw contact that we have when we first encounter an object. These sensations or feelings can be one of three types: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is not an emotional response but instead a visceral or reflexive response that is a product of our evolution. An example would be the sensation that we get when we touch a hot stove. We react to the unpleasant sensation reflexively, without thinking, by quickly drawing our hand away from the heat.

3. The third aggregate is: **Perception**. This refers to the templates that we have in our mind and keep in our memory, which we use to compare an object to for identification. For example, when you try a new food which you have never tasted before, you may describe it as tasting like chicken. You used the template in your mind as an object of comparison when describing the new food. You'll find upon reflection that this is a very common means that we use to describe almost everything that we encounter to something else. We also use this same method internally when we encounter anything new. We always compare it with something we know. Think for moment how you would describe the color of blue to someone that was born blind. It would be impossible. The person that has been blind since birth, has no template to which they can compare. It is this process in which is formed the concept of one's "self" as it relates to the object of one's perception. We abstract the characteristics of any object that we determined to be of interest to ourselves. It is this connection with oneself that enables us to hold the object in our awareness and give it a name. We always recognize something in relation to ourselves, something that we've experienced before and it always takes on a personal quality.

4. The fourth aggregate is: **Mental Formations**

(also called **Predisposing Mental Formations**). This refers to all mental elements other than Sensation (Feeling) and Perception. An example of this may be your favorite coffee mug that you use at work. Perhaps your wife or husband bought the mug for you while you were on vacation at the beach. It was a particularly fun vacation, and every time you hold the mug, it reminds you of the wonderful time that you spent with your spouse. There really isn't anything special or unique about the mug itself. It's simply a cheap, plastic cup with a handle and the beach's name painted on the side. Nothing about that particular object itself should illicit warm and pleasant feelings. As a matter of fact, your colleague, Jim, sees that very same coffee mug and has a very different reaction. As it happens, he also went to that very same beach with his wife, but instead of giving him a pleasant feeling, it reminds him of the fact that his wife left him, that she got full custody of their children, and half of his income every month. Every time Jim sees that coffee mug, he has feelings of anger and hatred. This is an example of the same object causing two very different reactions from people because of their predisposing mental formations. The object itself has no meaning. It is only through our perception process that we give objects meaning.

This is what I was referring to above when I said "seen through the filter of our mind, something is always added or changed ..." and "... everyone adds something to their experiences." It is particularly during this stage of the cognitive process when we distort the raw data entering our sense doors. Remember the movie that is playing in our mind? In your movie, the coffee cup has a special significance, but in Jim's movie, the coffee cup has a totally different meaning. This is why different people have totally different reactions to almost everything.

5. The fifth aggregate is: **Consciousness**. This is the awareness, reaction, or response that arises at one of the six base senses (eyes, nose, ears, tongues, body, and mind) as a result of the four previous aggregates. Consciousness does not

recognize an object, that happens in the third aggregate, but it instead infers or interprets what is being experienced, which in reality may be quite different from what is actually being perceived by the organism.

But this consciousness is not the consciousness of which we typically think. This consciousness is but an instant, a moment of our life, that is directly connected to the object that we're sensing and the sensory base (eyes, nose, ears, etc.) which is perceiving the object. At any given moment, we are receiving and processing a constant stream of sensory data, and through the perceptual process (the Five Aggregates), our mind is creating corresponding consciousnesses. All of these separate consciousnesses are streamed together by our minds to create our personal sense of reality. Much like all the individual frames of a movie come together to form a coherent story line, all of the individual consciousnesses come together to form the reality that we perceive. So you're not only the star of the show in your head. You're also the writer, director, producer, camera, film, projector, and of course most importantly, the audience.

Understanding these five aggregates is beneficial in not only understanding our minds and the minds of others, but it actually goes much deeper than this. These five levels of cognition together form the very psychophysical components of human existence. They are the very essence of what we are physically and mentally. There is nothing in addition to these five components that we can call "ourselves." We are this process, and the idea of "self," the idea of "I" affects our perception at deep conscious and unconscious levels that distorts our view of "what is" so that our experience is always colored and deceived.

It is the Buddhist view that we must not only understand this fact at a surface, rational level (which is superficial and deceptive) but also at the deep subconscious level of cognitive processing and is a necessary step in awakening from a self-deceptive existence in order to see things as they truly are.

This is where the practice of meditation comes in. It is through meditation that we systematically overcome the conditioning that is the fourth

aggregate, our predisposing mental formations, manifesting in a new kind of consciousness. By doing this, we transform ourselves dramatically, because by modifying our perceptual process, we don't just change how we react to our world, we change everything about ourselves. We essentially transform into different person.

Think for a moment about the role our mind plays in our lives. Every word that we utter, every decision that we make, even how we view and interpret the world around us, begins as a concept in our mind, a seed of thought, that grows to affect the world through our volitional actions. Just as everything that we encounter is perceived and measured as having a value of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral (see the Second Aggregate above), we are influenced by these perceptions, resulting in thoughts, words, or deeds that can be measured as wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral (neither good nor bad).

Since the purpose of this article is to explain the reason and power of meditation, I won't go too deeply into the structure of Buddhist morality. It will suffice here to say that a thought, word, or deed is considered wholesome (good) to the extent

that it is **not** motivated by, controlled by, or under the influence of greed, hatred, and delusion and a thought, word, or deed is considered unwholesome (bad) to the extent that it **is** motivated by, controlled by, or under the influence of greed, hatred, and delusion. So unlike most ethical systems, Buddhism measures morality not by its utilitarianism but instead by its motivation or intent, and motivation or intent is a function of the mind. Thus, whether our thoughts, words, and deeds are wholesome or unwholesome can be determined by the control we have over our mind. And there is no better method of controlling and transforming the mind than through meditation.

As I've established above, all that we are is a series of processes (the aggregates) made up of mind and matter. Our motivation or intent (therefore, our morality) is determined by the character that has formed, over time, by this process of perception. We truly are the sum total of all of our experiences, and it's through meditation that we can change how we experience the world around us, thus transforming our character and mind. This is the true purpose of meditation. It is a means of transformation. ■